DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 309 UD 012 060

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TITLE	Who Are The Poor In Puerto Rico?
INSTITUTION	Puerto Rico Univ., Rio Piedras.
PUB DATE	30 Aug 71
NOTE	21p.; Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Denver, Colo., August 30, 1971
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Community Development; *Economically Disadvantaged; Economic Disadvantagement; *Economic Factors; Economic Progress; Group Norms; Living Standards; Low Income; *Poverty Research; Puerto Rican Culture; *Puerto Ricans; Rural Economics; Socioeconomic Status; Subemployment
IDENTIFIERS	*Puerto Rico

ABSTRACT

Dichotomous poverty is defined by taking an arbitrary standard of consumption capability as a dividing line between rich and poor. An investigation into dichotomous poverty below the 2000 dollar level will be worthwhile, since, in 1953, the Planning Board announced as a goal the attempt to lift all families above this margin. In 1953, 78 percent of the families had an income below the 2000 dollar dichotomous poverty threshold. Forty-six percent did not reach it in 1963, and 39 percent did not reach it in 1969. The reduction in the percentage of dichotomous poor from 1963 to 1969 was not sufficient to keep up with the population. Between 1963 and 1969, population grew faster than economic progress. Continuous poverty classifies as poor those who fall in a specified bottom percentage of the population in terms of capability to consume. In terms of the distribution of income, the greater the inequality, the greater the amount of continuous poverty. While between 1953 and 1963 the poor earned more, the rest of the society earned even more than proportionately more. Agricultural workers, slum dwellers, families with unemployed or subemployed heads, and recipients of welfare are the groups who have progressed at the lowest rates--the lowest groups have progressed at the slowest rate. [Several pages in this document are not clearly printed and contain editorial markings.]
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Who are the Poor in Puerto Rico? (1)

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Poverty is commonly conceived in three different manners, each of which has a distinct perspective. The different conceptions, however, share in common a class connotation. Weber (1968:302, 926-32) defines class as one's access to the market, one's life chances. A person's class situation is defined as his probability to dominate the market more probably than some, less probably than others, equally probably as those in the same class situation as himself. Weber notes that: "'Property' and 'lack of property' are...the basic categories of all class situations" (1968:927). He adds, however, that "class situations are further differentiated: on the one hand, according to the kind of property that is usable for returns; and, on the other hand, according to the kind of services that can be offered in the market. ...(many) distinctions differentiate the class situations of the propertied.... Those who have no property but who offer services are differentiated just as much according to their kinds of services as according to the way in which they make use of these services, in a continuous or discontinuous relation to a recipient" (1968:927-8). Thus, Weber concludes that "class situation is...ultimately market situation. ...the factor that creates 'class' is unambiguously economic interest, and indeed, only those interests involved in the existence of the market" (1968:928).

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Weber goes on to say, however, that common class situation does not necessarily, nor even generally, generate similar reactions among the members of a class thereby leading to common social action.

It is Weber's conception of class as a ranking of people in economic terms, rather than his discussion of the problems of class action, that is of specific interest to us in this paper. Behind his conception of class is something similar to what is referred to in everyday language as buying or purchasing power, or what economists refer to as effective demand: not simply the assumed desire to consume but the practical ability to acquire or the use of items of consumption. Adam Smith's (1937:56) use of the concept in the following example nicely illustrates its meaning: "A very poor man may be said in some sense to have a demand for a coach and six: he might like to have it; but his demand is not an effectual demand, as the commodity can never be brought to market in order to satisfy it." Pointedly, it refers not to one's style of life but to the power, should one want to, to lead the kind of life as one might wish. The crucial variable is the capacity or capability to consume: the practical ability to acquire or the use of items of consumption.

Generally speaking, there are two types of indices for this economic capability to consume---one is what economists refer to as a "flow" variable, the other is what they refer to as a "stock" variable, each has specific advantages and disadvantages when used as an indice

of "buying power." The flow variable, income, refers to both monetary and non-monetary income as well as to "received income" gained by virtue of the possession of wealth (e.g., "the rental value of owner-occupied homes," Kolko, 1962:12). It is what Kolko refers to in general terms as "real income" (1962:10, 77, 102, etc.). Wealth, the stock variable, refers to one's possessions and assets less one's debts. A corrected more accurate version of wealth as a comparative indice would have to add to a person's possessions his unused credit potential. (It is not "legal wealth" plus unused credit potential since that would deduct "present debts" twice from the total---once from possessions and once from from credit potential.) It has never been made clear which of the two variables, income or wealth, is the better indice. However, for practical reasons (i.e., the availability of the data) income---and even just monetary income---is most frequently used to represent and differentiate the economic capacities of different persons. The class structure then refers to an ordering of these persons in function of their varying capabilities, however indicated and the different conceptions of poverty are derived by comparing the class structure of a specific society to a model of an ideal society. One or the other type of poverty exists to the extent that there is a deviation from the ideal model used.

A) Absolute poverty means insufficient effective demand to keep the person alive. It is a measurement of effective demand with a

critical level assigned---one gets "richer" as an increase in one's effective demand moves one further from starvation. A society where there is absolute poverty deviates from a model society where ideally nobody starves. Absolute poverty is absolute in the sense that the threshold is defined at the starvation level. It is the limiting case of what we below refer to as "dichotomous poverty." There is a continuum of possible societies that can emerge where X% of the population are "poor" and 100-X% are "rich" (X going from 0 to 100).

B) Dichotomous poverty is defined by taking an arbitrary standard of consumption capability as a deviding line between rich and poor: those that cannot consume on the level chosen are classified as poor. Dichotomous poverty is conceived as a deviation from an ideal society in which everyone has at least an ideally respectable minimum consumption capability. It is dichotomous in the sense that a threshold is assigned to divide the society into two: into "rich" and "poor." While the threshold can be raised or lowered, essentially two kinds of society are possible: one in which everyone has a respectable level of economic resources over against one in which some have achieved this level while others have not. As mentioned above, the limiting threshold is that of absolute poverty. There is an inherent incongruity in this definition: as soon as everyone reaches a certain level the level is "up"-ed---as soon as things get better the threshold is changed and things look worse---they look worse

because they got better? This is the kind of poverty that one refers to when one notes that historical conditions change what one considers to be poverty.

C) Continuous poverty classifies as poor those who fall in a specified bottom percentage of the population in terms of capability to consume. This type of poverty is manifest when there is a deviation from a model of ideal equality. The poverty level refers to the lower orders of a rank order and exists until equality is achieved. Thus, even if the specific effective demand of the 'poor' is improved this type of poverty is aggravated as the lower percentage groups receive proportionally less of the total societal consumption ability. It is continuous in the sense that is refers to the bottom levels of a rank order. While one can always change the percentage group that one is talking about there is no threshold per se that divides the rich from the poor. Again, there are essentially but two types of society that can result: those having equality of consumption capability over against those in which inequality prevails. The extreme example of this type of poverty occurs in societies where a few families control nearly all of the economic pie while the great masses of the population share among themselves but the uneaten crumbs. Many countries in Latin America, e.g., exhibit such extreme inequality: e.g., in Colombia the wealthiest 10% receives 43% of the national income, or in Brazil 79% of the population falls below the national average income (Goodman and Davis:1972).

Definitions A and B have in common the establishment of critical levels as thresholds (either the absolute level of starvation or the defined level of respectability). Definition B and C share the fact that they are both measures of relative effective demand. An increase in a society's effective demand does not necessarily eliminate absolute poverty since drastic inequality may exist in the richest of societies. An increase in equality, however, does work to eliminate dichotomous and continuous poverty. (In the case of dichotomous poverty, holding the population constant, if there is a redistribution of wealth from the top to the bottom then more people would be pushed above the level and less people would fall below it. Or, alternatively, if the wealth at the top is eliminated then the level would have to be lowered.) Equality in a rich society would theoretically eliminate all three types of poverty.

The relation between poverty and economic growth is not at all clear. Contrary to the hopes of modern day governmental idealists (Fomento, e.g.), economic modernization does not automatically eliminate poverty. Apparently, economic development in Puerto Rico even at the spectacular growth rate of 10% per year (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1966:I) but has meant the substitution of one system of inequality for another, albeit at a higher level of economic capacity. But as we will see poverty has not disappeared. Moreover, the negative projection of the idealists does not seem to hold either. In spite of such a projection, great

numbers of people suffering absolute poverty (as in India where the land cannot support the population) is not a necessary condition of the absence of economic development.

Before Puerto Rico's agriculture was rationalized for export production, before her population out-distanced the land, before her labor force was domesticated, the island's population consisted largely of subsistence farmers who though they had no great riches had no trouble taking from the land what was needed to avoid starvation. Indeed, one could argue that as economic development progressed with the introduction of commercial capitalist agriculture, and as the work force grew and was driven from their mountain plots onto haciendas, (originally through such "labor-repressive" means as the 1837 laws against vagrancy, the 1849 Ley de la Libreta o Reglamento de Jornaleros, etc., and then, once the "labor-market" was weighted against the individual worker because of population increases, by such exploitive economic controls as hacienda stores and credit, worker dependence on labor suppliers, and so on) the situation of these former land-"owning" jornaleros, thus converted into dispossed arrimaos, actually grew worse vis-a-vis the avoidance of starvation. There is a period in the growth of the money economy when the land no longer supplies available food and governmental mechanisms (such as welfare and food assistance programs, etc.) have not yet been adopted. At this point the only way to avoid starvation after all personal attempts fail is via communal hospitality.

Should the neighbors also be too hard pressed them absolute poverty abounds.

In general, as a society changes from a non-money agrarian economy to a money economy---and in the specific case of Puerto Rico, as the marginal areas of subsistence agriculture are progressively absorbed by the money economy---certain changes come about:

1 - Crops become conceptualized in function of their ability to yield income rather than for their immediate value as food. In Puerto Rico this process began before the turn of the century with the rationalization of the "after-dinner" crops (coffee, sugar, and tobacco---such crops are for well-fed foreigners not under-fed Puerto Ricans) and continues today with the food crops (plantains, bananas, oranges, and even gandules). Land was taken away from food production and in the cases where food crops remain they are for the market and not for the hungry neighbor. A type of Weberian-style class conflict (1968:928-32) exists in Puerto Rico's rural areas where land owners try to prevent workers from taking certain fruit and vegetables for food thus diminishing what the owner can sell in the market. In turn this creates resentment of the owner by the worker, producing such comments as "no wonder he's rich, the stingy glutton." It is not entirely clear why even poor rural people have taken this new conceptualization of agriculture for the market so seriously that today even when they could use their land to produce extra

food for themselves they choose to leave their land uncultivated. It may have something to do with the general downgrading of agriculture as a way of life, as well as with the sheer physical difficulty of non-mechanized campesino agriculture itself. One of the members of the sample in our study, from a coffee growing region, illustrates this downgrading in the following quotation: "In the country you don't do anything but stagnate. It oppresses the people. Those who stay don't progress. That's why the young people leave---the work out here is dirty and doesn't pay anything. No matter how much you wash yourself they always know that you work in agriculture, that you're from the country. Even better, all you have to do is take a couple of steps and they can tell where you're from. The best thing to do is to go to the city where you can get ahead."

2 - A change occurs in the personal conception of what the basic problem of poverty is all about. Previously, the problem was thought of as: "How do I eat?" Presently, the problem has become: "Where do I get money?" Many respondents in our study often described the situation of their parents in these terms: "We weren't really that poor, after all we always had enough to eat." On the other hand an occasional reply today goes to the effect that "well, I'm OK, I don't owe anybody much money."

3 - There is a change in the means of fighting absolute poverty. Formerly the land itself served as last resort. Today with the rationalization of agriculture the city-based government is expected via welfare programs to serve this function.

4 - Insofar as there are people who have experienced the availability of food off the land and who now find themselves in an urban situation there is probably a greater fear of starvation than before they had become urbanized. Should a former peasant, present slum-dweller, not do well in the job market and not be able to adequately deal with the bureaucracy this fear is real and justified. Strikingly, however, such a fear has also been expressed to us by people living in Puerto Rico's countryside! It would be worth investigating to what extent this fear actually motivated middle-class Puerto Ricans to achieve (similar in a sense to the Depression-generated fears of many urban Americans and Europeans).

5 - Absolute poverty is no longer a sufficient official definition to deal with the problems of poverty. In an economy that is not fully a money economy it is impossible to quantify income and wealth since most of it has not been priced on a market but has been received in kind. It is only with the rationalization of the economy that one can start to talk about comparative consumption capacity, about relative effective demand. Thus, the modern concern is with the establishing of respectable

levels of consumption capability and with concern for the equitable distribution of the society's economic resources.

Though difficult to evaluate it is probable that Puerto Rico never had great absolute poverty with people dying in the streets. (It is worth remembering that nutritional imbalance in one's diet is not equivalent to insufficient food.) As an agrarian society the land yielded food, as an urban society food assistance and other welfare programs work to minimize starvation. To a certain extent, during the transition between the two economies, migration back and forth between the campo and the city probably mitigated some of the strains produced by the transition. More important, however, especially in the case of Puerto Rican culture, is the role of the neighbor. By all standards, the poorest member of our sample is a 50 year old man who lives in a southeastern sugar-producing area. He owns nothing except for a five foot by three foot shack, some old clothes, and some metal plates. Moreover, he has never owned anything---never lived in a house with water or electricity, never owned any electric appliances or any furniture, never had more than the few rags he has for clothing. He has no regular work and is allowed only occasionally to help the local fishermen mend their nets---in fact he has not had any regular work for the past twenty years. How does he manage to survive at all? A sort of communal norm exists in Puerto Rico that we can call a fraternity of the poor. Observation in this community shows that when

someone is without food they go to a neighbor, announce the fact, or let the neighbor intuit it, and the neighbor will offer him a plate of food. The saying "today for you, tomorrow for me" illustrates the solidarity at this level. This man who owns almost nothing, has never owned very much, has almost no monetary income, has not worked for twenty years, has managed to get by on the charity of his neighbors--- neighbors who are not much better off than he is.

In fact, this fraternity of the poor presupposes that those that do the helping be not very well-off themselves. As one moves up and is making it, filled with motivation and drive, this type of human solidarity becomes less evident. A commercial fisherman from one of the areas we studied often complained that he wouldn't "put down his net in this area because the people here are hoggish and they think you're fishing for them." While it would be incorrect to overestimate the communal feelings of the poor in Puerto Rico (e.g., neighborhood addicts occasionally steal from other neighbors in the urban slum that we studied), the role of the neighbor should not be underestimated especially when it comes to the sharing of basic necessities such as food.

It is hard to be satisfied with merely minimizing absolute poverty: having the capacity to avoid starvation is far from having the economic capacity to lead a respectable life. Thus, the concern with

dichotomous poverty involves the search for a minimum annual family income beneath which a family is considered poor. The decision to use annual income rather than accumulated wealth as the indicator of effective demand is dictated by the availability of the data. Difficulties exist, however, including the fact that non-monetary income is hard to take into account and often as not is not so accounted for. It is even more difficult to take into consideration income derived not from wealth but by virtue of its possession: for example, the "received income" derived by the owner of a house by virtue of the fact that he has no rental outgo. Annual monetary income only somewhat approaches our definition of effective demand: the practical ability to acquire or the use of items of consumption. Unfortunately, it is the most common indicator available for general statistics. In Puerto Rico the principal source of this type of information is the comparative study undertaken by the island's Department of Labor in 1953 and 1963, published as "Income and Expenditures of the Families: Puerto Rico, 1963" (1967).

The difficulty of establishing where the level of respectability should be placed can be seen in the argument of Luis Nieves Falcón: "If we use the criteria established by the Department of Labor of the U.S., whereby an urban family with four members requires a minimum of $4,800 a year, the vast majority of Puerto Rico's families would be considered poor. It appears more reasonable to assume...that an income of $1,500

per year would define a poor family in Puerto Rico "(1970:13) . What he means by the phrase: "it appears more reasonable..." is that the level has to be drawn in function of the internally defined standards of the society in question.

Over the years different attempts have been made in Puerto Rico to establish thresholds that divide decent from non-decent standards of living (Puerto Rico: Planning Board, 1971b:5-6; Marín, 1957). In 1933 a doctor established $580 as the basic budget of a family with a balanced diet; in 1942, the Department of Public Welfare declared $1,310 to be the minimum annual sum necessary for a family of 5; in 1950, U.P.R.'s Home Economics Department declared that approximately $3,900 was needed for a family of 6 for food, clothing, personal care, housing, health, education, recreation, transportation, and "donations"; in 1963 the Department of Labor defined $4,056 as the annual minimum to meet "indispensable basic needs"; and in 1970, the Department of Health claimed that in order to live "básicamente bien" $5,702 was needed annually for a family of 5. The following chart shows the values of these estimates in terms of constant dollars, 1958 as the base. (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1971b:17).

Year	Estimate/ # Members	Price Index	Estimate in '58 Dollars
1933	$ 580/5		
1942	1310/5	64	$2047/5
1950	3893/6	76	3866/6
			3222/5
1953		91	
1958		100	
1963	4056/5	112	3621/5
1970	5702/5	138	4058/5

Thus it is obvious that the rise in the minimum standard is not completely due to the rise in prices. Rather it has to do with a change in what is considered minimally respectable. The original standards were concerned with a level just above starvation: that of good nutrition. At a certain point nutrition is not enough but clothing and personal care become necessities. Subsequently, a degree of hard goods---housing and household items---become necessary for a respectable life. These changes in minimum standards follow the changes in the patterns of consumption of the country in general. In 1947 66% of all personal consumption went for "soft" goods, 7% for "hard" goods, and 27% for services. In 1970, 50% went for soft goods, 17% for hard goods, and 34% for services (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1971b:42). Once typical Puerto Ricans cooked over fogones with wood as fuel, then over kerosene stoves, and today over a gas or electric range. At one point a plancha de carbón was used rather than the steam or electric iron of today, manufactured furniture rather than homemade benches are now typical even in remote rural areas.

None of these standards are easy to accept as useful *per se*. If for example we accept the last figure of $5072/5 then 70% of Puerto Rico's families would be classified as dichotomous poor. There are several reasons to reject such a figure. It negates the necessity to define the standard in terms of norms internal to the society. In part, this is due to the inability of income figures to take into account the "received-income rent-value" that some *agregados*, *arrabejaxos* and relatives may take advantage of by virtue of rent-free housing. But it also reflects in part the Americanization of standards due to the massive penetration of American advertising and commerce in Puerto Rico. One could argue that since Puerto Rico is exposed to the massive American penetration, that American styles are becoming the social norm if not the statistical one, and that therefore people "feel" deprived in relation to the American norms. Without underestimating the effectiveness of the advertising, this however, appears to us to be an exaggeration of that effect. Moreover, it presents one from studying the island's socioeconomies in historical perspective---since it would be the arrival of the advertising that would be the creator of the additional poverty!

If we bracket for a moment the unresolved debate as to which standard is most applicable, an investigation into dichotomous poverty

below the $2,000 level will be worthwhile---if for no other reason than it is the most frequently used level in official reports (Puerto Rico: Division of Public Welfare, 1964; Puerto Rico: Planning Board, 1954, 1965, 1967, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c). In 1953 the Planning Board announced as a goal the attempt to lift all families above this margin. In 1968 the party then in power in El Proposito de Puerto Rico (1968:84-5) announced $2,500 to be the minimal threshold (in 1953 dollars this would come to $1,929). Thus, a $2,000 dichotomous poverty threshold has become something of an official one although it has never been properly justified and has been applied using different years as the price base.

Planning Board data (1971a:22) reveal the following:

	1953	1963	1969
Threshold Annual Income	$2,000 (53)	$2,000 (53) 2,465 (63)	$2,000 (53) 2,465 (63) 2,937 (69)
% Below	78%	46%	39%
# Families Poor Total	328,000 420,000	212,000 461,000	229,000 586,000

In 1953 78% of the families had an income below the $2,000 dichotomous poverty threshold. Keeping the threshold constant (in terms of 1953

dollars), 46% of the families did not reach this level of respectability in 1963, and 39% did not reach it in 1969 (using projected figures). Important for the ecology of the island is the fact that the reduction in the percentage of dichotomous poor from 1963 to 1969 was not sufficient to keep up with the population: in 1953, 328,000 families were dichotomous poor, in 1963, 212,000 and in 1969, 229,000 (17,000 more than in 1963). Thus there are more dichotomous poor families (1953 = $2,000) today than in 1963 even though they comprise a smaller percentage of the total population. (In 1969 dollars this level is $2,937 annually or about $8 daily for a family of 5).

In order for both the percentage and the absolute number of families in dichotomous poverty to decrease, any increase in population has to be absorbed above the dichotomous poverty line. In other words, to prevent an increase in the ranks of the dichotomous poor "the country's economic progress has to stay at a par with the increase in population. Whether or not a particular model of economic development can in fact achieve this goal is indeed one important factor in our judging the effectiveness of that model. According to the government's own figures this was the case in Puerto Rico between 1953 and 1963, but not the case between 1963 and 1969, when population grew faster than economic progress. In part this is due to the slowdown of emigration of poor people out of the island. In the 10 years between 1953-1962 the average rate of exodus was 30,916 people/years while in the six years between 1963-1968, the average rate of exodus slowed down to 15,288 emigrants/years (Senior and Watkins, 1966:703).

Hernández Alvarez (1968:374-387) has described this process ~~in some detail~~: "From 1940 to 1960, the emigration practically matched the potential increase in the island's population by way of fertility. This respite aided in bringing unemployment within the reach of control and coincided with a certain degree of improvement in social conditions...." Hernández Alvarez feels that apparently emigration is some sort of help to Puerto Rico's economic development. For us, however, emigration represents a distorting factor to any attempt to understand such development, especially in function of the problem of dichotomous poverty. It makes it difficult to see how many people actually crossed the threshold out of dichotomous poverty over against those who simply crossed the frontier out of Puerto Rico into the U.S., no longer to be counted in the Puerto Rican annual family income figures. Those countries that look to Puerto Rico as an ideal model of economic development should realize that such a model implies massive and painful emigration as an integral factor.

In terms of the distribution of income the greater the inequality the greater the amount of continuous poverty (regardless of any increase in societal effective demand). In 1953 the lowest 20% of the population had 5% of the total income, while in 1963 it had only 4%. In 1953 the upper 20% had 50.5%, while in 1963, it had 51.5% (1971a:13). Thus, even though the poor may have increased their effective demand they lost

ground in relative terms: while the poor earned more the rest of the society earned even more than proportionally more. The following chart demonstrates the increases between 1953 and 1963 for different occupational categories (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1971a:15):

Occupation	% Increase
Agricultural workers	42
Professionals	57
Artisans, foremen, etc.	74
Non-agricultural workers	82
Skilled workers	106

Agricultural workers, slum dwellers, families with unemployed or subemployed heads (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1971a:15-19), recipients of welfare (Puerto Rico: Planning Board 1971c:22), are the groups who have progressed at the lowest rates---the lowest groups have progressed at the slowest rate! This analysis leads to a serious question. Do the data suggest something similar to what Michael Harrington describes for the U.S.---the formation of a poverty class of left-overs who "saw the rest of society move ahead"? (1962:17).

1) Paper read at the 66th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 30, 1971, Denver, Colorado. This paper is prepared in conjunction with "The Burden of Poverty in Puerto Rico" Research Project that the authors co-direct in the Social Science Research Center of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. It appears midway between the termination of data collecting and the commencement of data analysis. The authors wish to thank Dr. Norman Matlin of the Instituto Psicológico de Puerto Rico for his technical assistance.

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